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SIPDIS

STATE FOR EUR/CE AND NEA

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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT BASESCU VISITS DAMASCUS TO PROMOTE
COMMERCE

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Jeri Guthrie-Corn; Reasons 1.4(b)
) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) POLOFF met with MFA Middle East Director Mihai Dobre on October 23 to obtain a readout from President Basescu's two-day trip to Syria (10/20-21). Dobre noted that Basescu was invited by President Bashar al-Assad to begin the process of renewing Romanian-Syrian commercial ties that had been relatively dormant since Romania's accession to NATO and the EU. He also pointed out that the Basescu visit was part of a series of trips to the region to begin an overall widening and deepening of Romania's Middle East strategy and to diversify its trade relationships, including in the energy field. Besides meeting with al-Assad, Basescu also met with the Council of Ministers, the Chairman of the Parliament and the head of the Chamber of Commerce, reported Dobre. He said the focus of the visit was bilateral issues: economic ties, educational exchanges, and the plan to establish a joint Romanian-Syrian Economic Commission. Dobre said the request from the Syrians for such a joint commission is something on which Romania "intends to remain flexible." The main prerequisite for having such a commission would be the prospects of achieving concrete results, he emphasized. He did note, however, that unlike the agreement forged by the MFAs for joint commissions with Tunisia (done in June) and Morocco (completed last November), the Syrian proposal will be developed under the lead of the Minister of Finance, Varujan Vosganian.

¶2. (SBU) Dobre pointed out that the main areas for further development with Syria included the prospects for Romanian interests in oil, natural gas, agriculture, telecommunications, information technology, and construction.

He added that Basescu also used the trip to underscore Romania's interest in the Nabucco Project, singling out the gas pipeline being developed in Syria for delivering gas from Egypt to Turkey as a potential source for Nabucco. Finally, Dobre noted that Romania would advocate within the EU, along with France, for unfreezing the EU-Syria Association accord that has been suspended since 2005. Basescu asserted Syria's recent positive contributions in support of Middle East peace warranted this step. Dobre noted that Iran was mentioned only once by Basescu, and that was during a press conference in response to a reporter's question. Basescu had reiterated Romania's policy, which supported the EU position that Iran has an obligation for transparency with the international community and to comply with its obligations to the IAEA, Dobre explained.

¶3. (C) COMMENT: We note that Dobre was specific that Basescu did not venture into multi-lateral issues directly with Damascus. This means Basescu did not raise concerns--repeatedly shared with GOR--about Syria as an entry

point for suicide bombers, foreign fighters, and weapons smuggled into Iraq. Given Romanian troops in Iraq, it would have made sense for him to say something. The search for stronger economic links, and energy diversification in particular, are prime motivations for Basescu's forays to the Middle East. He also is planning trips to Lebanon, Libya, UAE, and Israel in the coming weeks. He has recently completed much shorter trips to Libya, Kuwait, and Iraq. As reported previously, Romania will continue to increase its tempo on expanding its Middle East out-reach, mainly for economic security reasons, but it will be difficult for Basescu to resist trying to return Romania to the days when it rather grandiosely saw itself as the mediator, if not the gateway, between "The Orient" and "The West." End Comment.

TAUBMAN